DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 503 EC 308 259

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TITLE	Educational Interpreters for Students Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Quick Turn Around Project Forum. QTA--A Brief Analysis of a Critical Issue in Special Education.
INSTITUTION	National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Alexandria, VA.
SPONS AGENCY	Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2000-11-00
NOTE	10p.
CONTRACT	H159K70002
AVAILABLE FROM	National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 320, Alexandria, VA 22314; Tel: 703-519-3800 (Voice); Fax: 703-519-3808; Web site: http://www.nasdse.org
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Ancillary School Services; Certification; *Deaf Interpreting; Deafness; Elementary Secondary Education; *Hearing Impairments; *Interpreters; Interpretive Skills; National Surveys; Partial Hearing; Pupil Personnel Services; State Departments of Education; *State Standards; Student Rights
IDENTIFIERS	*Individuals with Disabilities Educ Act Amend 1997

ABSTRACT

This brief paper reports on a 1999 survey of all state education agencies (SEAs) regarding the provision of educational interpreting for students with hearing impairments. Specifically, the survey posed questions regarding the number of students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act for whom educational interpreting is necessary, the number of educational interpreters available in the state or jurisdiction, the minimum certification requirements for educational interpreters, and guidelines for the evaluation of those currently employed in such positions. The survey found wide discrepancies between and within states in their capacity to meet the need for educational interpreters. However, SEAs are increasingly moving toward developing guidelines or legislation requiring educational interpreters to be certified or licensed by the state. Other issues addressed include pre-service preparation of interpreters, recruitment and inservice training, technical assistance needs, appropriate student needs assessment, and consistency in cost and services. (DB)

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Educational Interpreters for Students Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Quick Turn Around Project Forum. QTA---A Brief Analysis of a Critical Issue in Special Education.

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Quick Turn Around Project FORUM

QTA – A brief analysis of a critical issue in special education

Educational Interpreters for Students Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

November 2000

By Patrice Linehan

Background

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires that *no otherwise qualified individual with a disability ..., shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance* ... [29 U.S.C. §794(a)]. This civil rights legislation ensures that educational institutions receiving federal funds provide greater participation in school activities to students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Implementation efforts have led to increased interpreting services for deaf students, not only in classrooms but also at teacher conferences and other school-sponsored activities.

One of the challenges of providing an appropriate education for students who are deaf and hard of hearing is the inadequate number of educational interpreters. This problem is made worse by the geographical dispersion of students who need their services. In addition the quality of educational interpreters varies considerably across the country because, although the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) and the National Association for the Deaf (NAD) have issued standards for the certification and evaluation of interpreters, states have the option of establishing their own standards.

Purpose and Definition

In an effort to better understand and inform the field about the challenges state education agencies (SEAs) face related to educational interpreters, Project FORUM at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), requested information from SEAs on this topic. This activity was undertaken as part of Project FORUM's cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). The information gathered will be used to help OSEP, and the education community, make more informed decisions regarding personnel to support the education of children and youth who are deaf and hard of hearing.

For the purposes of this survey, the term *educational interpreter* refers to a person providing any of a variety of interpreting (e.g., oral, cued, English sign, American Sign Language) in an educational setting.

Survey

In November 1999, a seven-item survey was sent to all SEAs. Another round of the surveys was sent in January and again in March 2000, in an effort to receive input from a greater number of SEAs. Forty-nine states and two non-state jurisdictions responded as of April 2000, for a total of 51 completed surveys.

The survey posed questions regarding the number of students served under the

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Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for whom educational interpreting is necessary, as well as the number of educational interpreters available in the state or jurisdiction. SEAs were also asked about minimum certification requirements for educational interpreters and guidelines for the evaluation of those currently employed in such positions. Responses to these questions, along with data on SEA involvement in recruitment and in-service training of educational interpreters, were analyzed by Project FORUM staff and the findings are summarized in the following sections.

Need for Services

Students Served under IDEA

Of the 51 SEA respondents, 34 had no count of the number of students served under the IDEA for whom educational interpreting is necessary. While this information may not always be on record at the state level, it is often available through local districts or schools for the deaf and hard of hearing. Also, some SEAs have a record of the number of students identified as deaf and hard of hearing, but do not maintain information on the exact services received by students under IDEA. Others have estimates but no formal counts.

Sixteen SEAs provided information on the number of students needing educational interpreter services. However, these numbers vary greatly among the SEAs surveyed, frequently due to the size and population of the state. Delaware, a small state, lists eleven students in need of educational interpreting. Texas, a much larger state, documented 2,142 students[1]. Some high student counts, however, would not be anticipated based on the population size of the state. One example of this is Minnesota, which reported 1,997 students in need of services when surveyed by Project FORUM. The following table denotes the range of students served under IDEA for whom interpreter services are necessary according to Project FORUM findings:

Students in need of services (N=16)

# Students in need of educational interpreting	State Education Agency
100 or fewer	AR, DE, GU, ME, MI, ND, VT, WY
101-300	IN, KS, LA, OR
301 or more	CA, MN, PA, TX,

In some cases, the SEA expressed concern that reports of the number of students receiving interpreting services are being underestimated. For example, some students have educational interpreting designated as a related service in their IEPs, while some receive services on a more informal basis.

Data Collection Timelines and Methods

Of the 17 SEAs that have a record of the number of students receiving educational interpreting, there is some variation in the method and timeline for collecting this information. For instance, one SEA gathers information only as needed, while another receives the data monthly.

Nine SEAs collect such information annually, three gather the data biannually, and another reports that records are updated four times per year. The frequency of data collection was not available from two of the states surveyed.

The process for gathering information on the number of students served under IDEA for whom educational interpreting is necessary also differs among responding SEAs. Ten of the 17 SEAs reported that LEAs submit the data to the SEA directly, as part of the annual child count and data reporting process. In

[1] This count was based on a statewide survey, conducted by Gallaudet University (Dec. 98). Also, data is submitted by school districts annually. This electronic statewide data count was 1,171 students (Oct. '98), but is considered to be a low estimate.

some of the ten states, this information is sent electronically and is available on an ongoing basis.

There is no consistent process for gathering such information among the remaining seven SEAs. However, some examples of collection methods are:

- All LEAs or intermediate units are surveyed by the SEA.
- State or regional coordinators collect data to send to the SEA.
- The LEA compiles the data at each IEP meeting.

Personnel

According to clarifying comments written on Project FORUM survey responses, the level of proficiency of some people providing educational interpreting services is considered to be below acceptable levels. Anecdotal cases abound of schools using the services of uncertified parents, who often have had only community education classes in signing. Some people who are providing interpreting services in the public schools are not officially educational interpreters because they do not have the training or certification necessary to meet the requirements. Some teachers have "just enough" sign training that they are allowed to interpret for the one child in the class for whom services are needed.

Inconsistency of Services

As the number of deaf students entering general education classrooms has grown, the number of qualified interpreters has not kept pace (Jackman, 1999). According to the 1999 *Washington Post* newspaper article, this is a nationwide problem and is not unique to K-12 schools. Post-secondary institutions are experiencing many of the same challenges. In some cases, interpreting services are inconsistent. For example, the interpreter may not be fluent in the student's sign language (e.g., American Sign Language or Signed Exact English). Also, interpreters sometimes do not show up at all, arrive late, or are unprepared. To address some of these issues, the Department of Education (DOE) has considered alternatives for deaf students, such as computer-based note-taking systems (Jackman, 1999).

Number of Educational Interpreters

SEAs must report interpreter personnel data as part of the annual data collection process required by the federal government. Therefore, SEAs were able to provide more information on the number of educational interpreters than on the number of students served by such personnel.[2] Of the 51 SEAs who responded to Project FORUM's survey, 33 reported a statewide count of the number of educational interpreters. However, among the 33 SEAs, varying degrees of training and experience can be found.

Alaska reported a count of 22 personnel identified as educational interpreters. However, there are also an additional 16 "signing aides" who are serving students but do not have the same qualifications as the interpreters. One state indicated a count of zero because the SEA has no criteria for educational interpreters. Therefore, although there are individuals providing services (e.g., regular interpreters, teachers, or assistants), they are not identified specifically as educational interpreters.

Eighteen SEAs reported that there was no formal count available for the number of educational interpreters. In one SEA, such personnel are listed as paraeducators and the state does not collect the information specifically for educational interpreters. Two

[2] Although all SEA must provide personnel data for annual count purposes, there are a number of reasons that survey respondents may not have had the educational interpreter personnel information. The data may be accessed from different databases, such as certification or personnel, rather than special education programs. Also, there is sometimes less flexibility in making queries and/or determining FTEs through various databases.

SEAs have estimated counts based on a variety of informal data collection processes.

Data Collection Timelines and Methods

Data collection methods used among the 33 SEAs that have statewide counts on educational interpreters vary. Although SEAs gather data on the number of educational interpreters as part of their annual federal data report, some receive the information more frequently (e.g., ongoing, monthly, biannually, three times per year, five times per year and as needed). Thirteen SEAs stated that they receive personnel information directly from the LEA specifically for the annual data collection process. In at least four of these 13 SEAs, data are submitted electronically, allowing reporting throughout the year with a final count reported at year-end.

State or regional service coordinators for the deaf and hard of hearing gather such personnel information in five SEAs at various intervals. In five other cases, a central body other than the SEA collects the information, and forwards it to the SEA. Some examples include schools or centers for the deaf and hard of hearing or deaf/blind, and universities. Three SEAs use personnel data when calculating the number of interpreters. This occurs in relationship to state categorical aid reimbursements, and annual personnel information reports submitted to OSEP.

Some SEAs use less formal means for collecting educational interpreter personnel information. One SEA reported that a formal statewide survey was done several years ago and has been kept up-to-date through various mailings and information compiled in a *Directory of Interpreters*. Others use ongoing information from workshops, training sites and annual conferences; compile lists of educational interpreter service personnel who have served students; and/or call LEAs as needed.

Minimum Certification Requirements

In terms of certification, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) certification is generally accepted as the preferred standard. However, the National Association for the Deaf (NAD) has a certification testing program that reports results according to various skill levels, rather than the pass/fail system of RID. Therefore, the NAD is sometimes used in cases where more flexibility is needed.

Some people functioning as educational interpreters have some sign experience, but are not proficient enough to pass certification or licensure requirements. SEAs recognize that this is not the optimal situation and are working to establish more rigorous requirements for personnel in this area. For example, Alabama recently passed a law that those who function as an educational interpreter must have a license, which requires passing a state competency test.

According to Project FORUM's survey, 22 of the 51 responding SEAs have minimum state requirements for educational interpreters. These requirements vary from having some interpreter skills and a high school diploma to detailed combinations of written examinations, performance evaluations, interviews and careful screening by the SEA. The most common requirements include participation in a training program at a state-accredited institution, and/or national certification from RID or NAD.

Because of severe personnel shortages and/or the need for services in rural areas, a continuum of options is often available for certification or progress toward certification. Of the 22 states with minimum requirements, a few reported establishing various levels of certification. These states require different levels training based on qualifications and degrees, and salaries are matched accordingly. For lower levels of certification, additional coursework is required for certification and

renewal of certification is more frequent. As stated earlier, SEAs may accept lesser levels of proficiency on the NAD in order to meet their needs.

The Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA), a diagnostic tool to determine interpreting proficiency, is commonly used by SEAs. Some states have set minimum EIPA scores as a requirement for certification. Other requirements commonly used by SEAs to determine certification eligibility are:

- Completion of specific courses (e.g., multicultural education, team teaching)
- Agreement to abide by the code of ethics for educational interpreters
- Letters of reference from consumers
- Practicum or experience interpreting in educational settings

The quality of educational interpreters is not always decided at the SEA level and may be left to other agencies, boards or individual school districts. Thus, discrepancy can be found sometimes from one area to the next within the same state.

Twenty-nine of the 51 SEAs responding to Project FORUM's survey do not have minimum state requirements for educational interpreters. However, some of them have extensive guidelines (e.g., New Jersey, Pennsylvania) or are currently developing requirements (e.g., Florida, Nebraska, New York, North Carolina). Efforts are underway to address this issue in at least three other SEAs (Guam, South Carolina, and California). California plans to have representatives from various professional, consumer, and parent groups assist with this endeavor. Ongoing training opportunities, on-the-job mentoring and skill development workshops are also used by SEAs to improve services, despite the lack of formal requirements.

Personnel Evaluation Guidelines

Data from the Project FORUM survey show that 9 of the 51 participating SEAs have minimum guidelines for evaluating educational interpreters. These guidelines range from general employee performance evaluation surveys to ongoing screening of currently employed interpreters through the use of the EIPA during the certification renewal process.

At least seven of the 42 SEAs without guidelines currently are working on developing minimum guidelines for certification and/or evaluation. At least two of these SEAs plan to release the guidelines within the next few months. Two of the seven states are in the piloting stages of development and one state was awarded funds to set up four training, assessment and preparation centers.

Although they do not have evaluation guidelines for educational interpreters, three SEAs reported the use of minimal guidelines for renewing licenses or certifications. Other SEAs are studying this issue. In one state, deaf educators from the SEA, and representatives from each of four state regions within the state, are in a year-long training with Front Range Community College in Denver to examine educational interpreter evaluations. Another state awarded a one-time grant to conduct evaluations of educational interpreters.

A few SEAs reported that evaluations are used only under specific circumstances (e.g. by staff at the school for the deaf-blind, or when a complaint is lodged against an interpreter in the state). In at least three states (North Dakota, South Carolina, and Washington), various legislative bills have been introduced regarding regulation of educational interpreters. However, in the states mentioned, none has been passed to date.

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Pre-service Preparation

Interpreter preparation programs vary in regard to admissions requirements and degrees conferred. The RID website lists 112 interpreter preparation programs in 41 states. A directory of American Sign Language (English) Interpreter Preparation Programs was compiled by the National Interpreter Training Consortium, which includes 12 training projects that are funded by the Department of Education to assist in providing a sufficient number of skilled interpreters to meet the needs of deaf and deaf-blind individuals nationwide. According to this list, there are 14 undergraduate programs and three graduate programs in 13 states offering baccalaureate degrees in ASL—English interpretation. Other states must hire interpreters prepared at out-of-state intitutions of higher education or provide alternative routes to certification.

Of the 51 SEAs responding to Project FORUM's survey, ten were "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with the pre-service training of educational interpreters. Nineteen of those surveyed were "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" with the training, while 14 were neutral on the topic, generally because the respondent felt that competency varied depending on the person and interpreter training program attended. Eight SEAs did not respond to the question of pre-service satisfaction, or felt that it was not applicable due to the fact that there is no interpreter training program located in the state or jurisdiction. However, the SEA respondents from states with no preservice preparation programs were no more or less satisfied with interpreters training levels than those with preparation programs.

In general, SEAs that reported being dissatisfied with pre-service training felt that the training is not preparing graduates to meet state interpreter competency requirements. One SEA cited the need to supplement training with costly in-service preparation, and another decided to encourage pre-service training that is more relevant to interpreters serving in the classroom.

SEA Recruitment and In-service Training

Of the 51 SEAs responding to Project FORUM's survey, 26 stated their SEAs are involved in both recruitment and in-service training of educational interpreters, and six others work with in-service training only. Sixteen have no involvement in these areas, and three SEAs did not respond to this survey question.

Kansas is participating in the multi-state distance learning program coordinated by Front Range Community College in Colorado. Some interpreters in Wyoming are also involved in this program. The Governor Baxter School for the Deaf in Maine is using technological advances to provide in-service training.

Technical Assistance Needs

When survey participants were asked if the SEA has a need for technical assistance related to educational interpreters, 45 of the 51 SEAs indicated such a need. In fact, multiple needs were identified by a large majority of SEAs. The most prevalent response to this item was the need for help in providing *in-service training*, which was reported as a challenge by 34 of the 45 SEAs. *Recruitment* and *retention* is also rated as a high-priority for technical assistance. Recruitment was identified by 31 of the 45 SEAs and 27 mentioned retention.

Twenty-two SEAs cited additional technical assistance needs, beyond the choices listed in the Project FORUM survey. Eight SEAs cited a need to *establish statewide standards* for the job category, and/or certification and performance standards of educational interpreters. Four SEAs would like assistance in *developing evaluation standards* and procedures specific to educational

interpreting. Pre-service training (e.g., availability, relevancy), *distance learning* (e.g., format for training, atypical routes to certification), *salary equity* and *funding*, were also listed as concerns for some SEAs. At least one state thinks it would be helpful for SEAs to come together to collaborate as they work through many of these shared issues.

Additional Issues Raised by Respondents

Based on Project FORUM survey comments and guidelines from SEA personnel, there are a number of issues being considered or addressed by SEAs in order to improve educational interpreter services.

Appropriate student needs assessment

It is important to determine which student needs are best met through educational interpreting services. Such factors as the cognitive, linguistic, and academic needs of the student should be considered. Social, emotional, cultural and expressive needs - as well as age and maturity level - are also important for educational placement. Because the interpreting needs of deaf and hard of hearing students vary considerably, and multi-disabled students may need additional related services, it is vital that students be appropriately identified and receive the most qualified interpreter to meet their individual needs.

Recruitment and Training of Personnel

Once a student's needs are properly assessed, an educational interpreter with the knowledge and skills that are required to provide such services must be found. SEA guidelines and requirements for certification, training, and evaluation are needed to ensure that educational interpreters are qualified to meet the increasing demand for these services. In some cases, more collaboration between SEA and educational institutions to improve pre-service and in-service personnel preparation opportunities may be needed.

Consistency in Cost and Services

Inconsistency in job titles within SEAs and across jurisdictions can be confusing and may lead to a disparity in service delivery. Clear qualification guidelines and titles may alleviate some problems. The cost of educational interpreting services also varies considerably depending on the supply of qualified professionals and geographic location. Reports tell us that interpreters complain about the lack of competitive pay for their services in the public schools, especially when they can freelance and make double or triple the amount in other fields. If interpreters are working through a placement company, services may be more expensive due to the cost of overhead expenses; however, the profits are not always passed on to those who directly provide the services.

Since the passage of the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, more government agencies and private businesses are seeking sign language interpreters than ever before. Interpreters in some areas can choose to work a government function, or a business meeting, and perhaps get paid more without having to lock themselves into a regularly scheduled class that may also require technical expertise.

Educational interpreters also complain that they are not treated as p fessionals and they criticize how they are use.l in the educational settings. Some interpreters are not aware that they can or should be part of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team meetings. Efforts should be made to include all persons with knowledge of individual student needs, and to share information when appropriate in order to improve services whenever possible. In addition, relevant services other than interpreting should be considered when appropriate. Deaf and hard of hearing students may have requests for services other than interpreters, such as note-takers or assistive technology.

Final Remarks

The survey conducted for this analysis revealed that there are wide discrepancies between, and even within states in their capacity to meet the need for educational interpreters. However, SEAs are increasingly moving toward developing guidelines or legislation requiring educational interpreters to be certified or licensed by the state. This means that personnel must be properly trained and tested. Schools can no longer rely on a staff member who knows "some" sign language to translate. Professional sign language interpreters develop their skills over long periods of time and training, and learn various forms of sign language which may be unfamiliar to a beginner or casual user.

SEAs recognize the knowledge and expertise needed to provide the appropriate services for students to be included in the least restrictive environment, and are making efforts to address shortages and personnel preparation issues. This issue is particularly relevant to inclusive practice, since more than 80 percent of students who are deaf or hard of hearing spend at least part of their day in general education classrooms. (National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, 1997). The federal government is also exploring ways to encourage people to get the necessary training to become certified, such as through easier access to training via course work or distance learning technology.

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This report was supported in whole or in part by the U.S. Department of Education (Cooperative Agreement No. H159K70002). However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position of the U.S. Department of Education, and no official endorsement by the Department should be inferred.
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